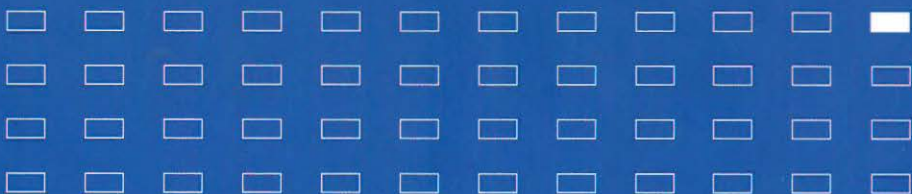


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adaptive reuse

the modern movement  
towards the future



EDITORS

ANA TOSTÕES  
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# Living a Manifesto: The Second Life of EDF's Housing Towers in Ivry-sur-Seine (Atelier de Montrouge, 1963-67)

Catherine Blain

ECOLE NATIONALE SUPÉRIEURE D'ARCHITECTURE ET DE PAYSAGE DE LILLE, PARIS, FRANCE

On their completion in 1967, 2 small towers of raw concrete in Ivry-sur-Seine, towers that were full-blooded "architecture-sculptures", were hailed by critics as a manifesto of the Modern Movement. For the architects of *Atelier de Montrouge*, this project of "stacked town-houses" created in response to a commission for staff housing units, primarily represented a new model for the development of other urban housing programs. Abandoned in the late 1990s by the owner, the national electricity company (EDF: *Electricité de France*), these towers came close to being demolished. Squatted for over a year while their owner was trying to sell to the highest bidder (2001-2002), they fell into a state of serious disrepair before being saved by their inclusion on the list of Historical Monuments (2003). The subsequent renovation project slowly emerged and was steered by a private developer and a specific architect, who were well aware of the issue of preserving modern heritage: Paul Chemetov, an architect contemporary with the Montrouge team. Well-managed over the long-term, the building's rehabilitation is finally coming to completion. Almost all the apartments, which very quickly found buyers, should be occupied by the summer of 2016. This whole transformation process has been closely followed by the writer and director Anne Rizzo, with the intention of making a documentary film. Confronting different readings, past, present and close future, this will question the status of these small brutalist towers, now located at the heart of a wider sector of urban renewal. As a participant in this documentary, Catherine Blain raises here two types of issues: first on the nature of the initial project and its potential for transformation and second on the strategy and guidelines adopted for its rehabilitation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, a discreet restoration project is being carried out at the heart of the former industrial neighbourhood of Ivry, located east of Paris: 2 small raw concrete towers of 5 and 7 storeys, which are called "*les terrasses de l'Atelier*" and presented as a "real historical treasure of the city" (according to the site advertising panel).

Designed by the *Atelier de Montrouge*<sup>1</sup>, these little towers originally accommodated 11 staff apartments, one on each floor, intended for the managers of the power station situated on the Seine riverbank – operated by the national electricity company, EDF (*Electricité de France*). Hailed by critics after their completion in 1967, mainly because of their sculptural and brutalist aesthetic<sup>2</sup>, they were quickly included among the significant achievements of modern architecture in France. Abandoned by their owner at the end of the 1990s, however, the towers were squatted in and degraded for over a year and only just escaped demolition. Saving them would take more than a decade.

The first stage began in 2003 with the inclusion of the towers in the inventory of Historical Monuments<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, a buyer still had to be found, and a plan

defined for their future. First supported by a private real estate developer, the architect Paul Chemetov<sup>4</sup> drew up a transformation project from 2004 onwards, taking into account the urban redevelopment scheme of the area prepared by Bruno Fortier (with Dusapin-Leclerc and TER, 2004). The 2<sup>nd</sup> stage began with the acquisition of the land and its buildings by the SADEV 94, the departmental planning and development company in charge of the urban renewal of Ivry-Confluences (145 ha) which, from then on, put together the operational and financial package of the renovation project. Chemetov's project followed this evolution. Resumed in 2011, his detailed study allowed the commencement of construction in 2013. The apartments, which were sold by an estate agent based on future plans, have quickly found buyers; they should be occupied by the summer of 2016. The 3<sup>rd</sup> stage, that of the renaissance of the towers, is thus predicted.

This whole transformation process has been closely followed by the writer and director Anne Rizzo, with the intention of making a documentary film about it. Confronting different readings, past (the original project), present (the transformation) and immediate future (the new aspect and way of life), it will question the status of these iconic buildings, now located at the heart of a wider sector of urban renewal and inhabited by new owners. Using archival materials and interviews, of architects and historians and new inhabitants, Rizzo also intends to question the notion of modernity in architecture, and the possibility of updating the ideas of the 1960s in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In order to open this discussion, this article will highlight 2 types of issues which were raised by the film. Firstly, as regards the initial project: what were the design concepts and to what extent have these enabled adaptations, developments, transformations? Then the rehabilitation: what strategy and what guidelines have been adopted, taking into account the present realities of the buildings and current needs?

## 2. TWO LITTLE TOWERS OF RAW CONCRETE

This project is the built translation of a classic, yet specific concept of urban dwelling: namely that of "stacked housing". As developed by the *Atelier de Montrouge*, this concept didn't come out of the blue. Echoing Le Corbusier's "*immeubles-villas*" project (1925), in which each apartment is a small house with a garden, it responds also to a precise problem: the specifications given by the EDF company which require, for its supervisory staff members, individual dwellings that match defined requirements as regards amenities and living area (10% bigger than standard public housing), built like single houses with private gardens and garages<sup>5</sup>.

The architects had already drawn up a dwelling programme for EDF in 1962, as part of their first commission for the company in Issy-les-Moulineaux, an industrial suburb situated west of Paris. During the construction of the STI n. 1, a conversion project of an old industrial structure into a modern office building

(1959-65), they were asked to create four staff dwellings on a side street, lining up with the existing terraced houses of the 1930s. Giving priority to this terrace housing idea, they put forward a project of four comfortable houses with gardens (5 to 6 rooms, 120m<sup>2</sup>), which were conceptualized as a dynamic composition of small concrete blocks of 2 or 3 levels, that allowed for numerous roof decks<sup>6</sup>.

This typological research was continued in 1963 on the site at Ivry, next to the still functioning power station, this time for a programme of 12 dwellings. A first sketch immediately showed the absurdity of creating individual houses opposite this massive industrial installation. It is from these circumstances, with the aim of finding an alternative that would offer the same qualities as an individual house, that the concept of “stacked houses” arose. Consequently, this included the principle of vertical constructions made up of one apartment per storey, and accessible by a central passageway so that all four façades enjoyed extensive views onto the landscape.

Once this concept was accepted, it was investigated by the architects to its maximum degree of formal definition, incorporating recurrent themes of the Modern Movement such as open-plan layout, free façade and constructive honesty. Seemingly complex, the design is in fact very simple. The composition is based on 2 main principles: a basic plan of a square 5 room apartment with 2 outdoor decks (100m<sup>2</sup> / 20m<sup>2</sup>) and a structural system of in-situ raw concrete that consists of four “sails” and 4 load-bearing poles that brace the floor slabs. This makes it possible to create the non-load-bearing façades, and their free composition of the solid panels (concrete) and the windows and bay windows (in wood and aluminium). All the variations, in layout plan and elevation, are based on a second principle: the rotation of the layout by a quarter turn on each floor, which changes the exposure and characteristics of the dwellings, protected from their patios. Moreover, this generates the characteristically interlocking effect on the façade, giving a sculptural dimension to the structure.

The interaction of these principles with the housing needs gave shape to 2 little towers, of different sizes and heights, implanted in a sculptural manner on a landscaped site: the small tower, a square of 5 storeys and 13,30 metres on each side, comprises five 5 room apartments (100m<sup>2</sup>) while the large tower, 7 storeys and 14,30 metres on each side, contains four 5 room apartments (1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> floor, 124m<sup>2</sup>), one 3 room (6<sup>th</sup> floor, 77m<sup>2</sup>) and two 6 room in partial semi-duplex configuration (5/6<sup>th</sup> and 6/7<sup>th</sup> floors, 135m<sup>2</sup>)<sup>7</sup>.



FIGURE 1. *Atelier de Montrouge*, EDF staff housing towers, Ivry-sur-Seine, 1963-67. View showing the industrial context. © SIAF/CAPA/Archives d'architecture du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ATM, Pierre Joly and Véra Cardot, 1967.

### 3. ASSEMBLAGE OR MONOLITH?

In that era of unequalled constructive fervour, which witnessed the building of vast mass housing projects, the little Ivry towers seem totally marginal, considering the nature and the scale of their programme (11 staff dwellings), the way they were designed and in their architectural expression. Would it, consequently, be realistic to compare this project to other dwellings programmes designed by contemporary architects close to the Montrouge team, such as, for instance, the state housing complex of Bagnolet designed by Paul Chemetov and Jean Deroche (AUA, 1965-71)? At first glance, the scale and the shape of this 280 dwellings and 5 artist studios project, contained within 3 cruciform towers of 11, 13 and 15 storeys, have nothing in common with the Ivry tower. But the main difference, as pointed out by Chemetov, is their conceptual approach: whereas the architecture of Bagnolet is an "assembly of parts", using prefabricated elements and then by nature de-constructible and re-constructible, the architecture of the Ivry towers is a "monolith" – a magnificent raw concrete monolith, impossible to take apart<sup>8</sup>.

It is true that, for this project as for the others (such as the small Clamart library, 1962-66, classified as a historical monument in 2009), the Montrouge architects focused on exploring the principles of composition and appearance which tacitly fall within the Corbusian quest for "the masterly, correct and magnificent interplay of masses brought together in light". But they were also interested in issues of assemblage, as can be seen in their early housing project for the CECA competition (1959-60, unselected) and their numerous studies on the principles of open industrialization and components for the Vaudreuil new town (1967-72),



FIGURE 2. Atelier de Montrouge, EDF staff housing towers, Ivry-sur-Seine, 1963-67. Layout of the small tower and construction system. © SIAF/CAPA/Archives d'architecture du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ATM.

BAGNOLET  
AUA, P. Chemetov, J. Deroche

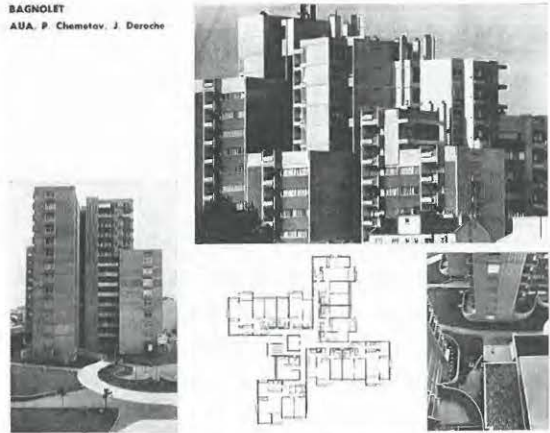


FIGURE 3. Paul Chemetov, Jean Deroche et al, housing complex at Bagnolet, 1965-71. © Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, n. 144, June-July 1969, 26.

However, they would never get the commissions allowing them to demonstrate this line of thought. Nevertheless, in Ivry they seized the opportunity to explore a new urban concept that was to become their manifesto: against the hegemony of models, for experimentation in terms of habitat, no matter what scale, the programme or the constructive system.

If the architectural press hailed the achievement, did the inhabitants perceive the message? Unfortunately, nobody raised the question then; and a more recent attempt to track down longstanding users to bear witness came to nothing. Nevertheless, in 2003, when the towers were saved by a decree establishing their historical value, traces of some 50 years of daily life could be found in those apartments that had never been revamped: in the worn aspect of the interior finishes and amenities: original sinks, baths, radiators and handrails that were still in place, wallpapers and floorings that might have changed with time. However, the concrete façades had been subjected to some damage, and the original windows had been changed for new ones, made out of smaller sections of large white PVC frames.

#### 4. THE SPLENDOUR OF RENOVATION

“To transform is to preserve”, Paul Chemetov likes to say – reversing thereby Aurélio Galfetti’s famous aphorism<sup>9</sup>. Among others, Chemetov believes that the existing building, the “*déjà là*”, acts as a witness to its own transformation, as he wrote recently: “An intervention into an existing building, if not done in opposition to, but in sympathy with, what is already there, always leads to convincing results”<sup>10</sup>.

Chemetov’s rich and abundant oeuvre includes a certain number of renovation projects. One of the best-known is the Great Gallery of Evolution at the Natural History Museum in Paris, where the contemporary design has enhanced both the building and its collections (1994, with Borja Huidobro and the designer René Allio). In this kind of project, Paul Chemetov demonstrates how well he knows how to “stand on the shoulders of his predecessors”, in order to make a work of art while bringing new life to past constructions. But at Ivry, he faced the work of his contemporaries, with whom he had, and has, ties of friendship – especially with Pierre Riboulet of the *Atelier de Montrouge*, who died in 2003. Thus, his interest in their small brutalist towers, that experienced so many vicissitudes and finally secured protection, cannot be neutral: he has cared for them as if they were endangered works of his own – in fact, a situation that he recently and most unfortunately encountered elsewhere<sup>11</sup>.

In these circumstances, his approach became all the more respectful of what is already there – and what this could or should mean today. Indeed, from the start of the project, his aim has been to restore the towers in their iconic state, as close as possible to the initial project, while, at the same time, bringing them up-to-date with present-day norms of comfort and thermal performance. These





FIGURE 4. *Atelier de Montrouge*, EDF staff housing towers, Ivry-sur-Seine, 1963-67. Photographic report 2002; 2016. © Catherine Blain.

guidelines are in no way negated by the property-development strategy adopted by the developer, which maintains the towers as dwellings while also introducing some significant changes: company staff housing becomes private co-ownership with a different financial model. It explains why the layout of the small tower has been cut in 2, in order to create smaller apartments, that are more affordable in financial terms (two 2 room flats of 46 and 54m<sup>2</sup> each floor, except on the 4<sup>th</sup>, with a 3 room flat of 68m<sup>2</sup> and a studio of 30m<sup>2</sup>). Apart from these changes, the project has aimed to preserve the original appearance of the buildings, notably by insulating the concrete façades from the inside and by restoring the rhythm of the original woodwork of the windows, – using, though, a new kind of joinery which, being made of grey anodized aluminum, introduces a new aesthetic.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Adaptability, as we know well, and as Paul Chemetov often says, is always constrained by the economic viability of the situation “on the ground”. Completely embedded in the vast urban renewal project of Ivry-Confluences, the *Terrasses de l’Atelier* operation probably benefited from good conditions. Only the future will show if, in that specific context, the choices endorsed by Paul Chemetov constitute an exemplary achievement. In the meantime, we should already celebrate the preservation of this significant element of the 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage, which is still among the very few examples of post-war housing projects that are protected in France. In Ivry, 2 other housing projects, also recently labelled “heritage of the twentieth century” (2008), urgently call for the same kind of attention: the Raspail towers (Renée Gailhoustet, 1963-68) and Jeanne Hachette Centre (Jean Renaudie and Renée Gailhoustet, 1969-76). Let us hope that these calls for help, too, are heard, and that these projects are not doomed to become beautiful ruins.

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### NOTES

- 1 This *Atelier* was founded in November 1958 by 4 architects: Jean Renaudie (1925-1981), Pierre Riboulet (1928-2003), Gérard Thurnauer (1926-2014) and Jean-Louis Vêret (1927-2011).
- 2 See in particular *Techniques et Architectures*, n. 1, 1968, 80-83; *Cahiers du CSTB*, n. 93, 1968 (notebook “*Le Détail des Architectes*”, 25); François Loyer, “*Exercices de Déboîtement*”, *L’Oeil*, n. 170, 1969, 42-43; Jacques Lucan, *France Architecture 1965-1968*, Paris, Electa Moniteur, 1989, 19-21.
- 3 Decree of 11 July 2003, protecting the towers (façades and roof), the garages and the fencing around the site.
- 4 Born in Paris in 1928, Paul Chemetov was a member of another important agency during this period: the *Atelier d’Urbanisme et d’Architecture* (AUA), founded in 1959 under the leadership of Jacques Allégret and which gathered more than 20 professionals from 1960 to 1986.
- 5 These specifications were recalled in an internal document: EDF, *Normes Générales et Equipement Intérieur des Logements Construits pour le Personnel des Centrales Thermiques d’Electricité de France. 1er juin 1964 [fonds ATM/ Archives d’Architecture du XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle]*.
- 6 This dynamic composition was restrained by financial restrictions but the idea would be revisited in Ivry-sur-Seine.
- 7 Built between June 1966 and December 1967, the 2 towers have cellars in the basement and the dwellings have also private garages, located on the northern boundary of the site.
- 8 Interview with Catherine Blain, February 3, 2016. See also Paul Chemetov, lecture of 28 October 2014 at Ensa Marne-la-Vallée, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88mqRlqH0zA>; accessed on February 2016.
- 9 “*Mantener = Transformar*” was Gaffetti’s guideline for his important reorganization project of Castelgrande in Bellinzona (1981-2000).
- 10 Paul Chemetov, “*Le Projet de la Samaritaine est une Aberration Urbaine*”, *Le Monde*, 11, 2014.
- 11 For example, the housing project “*Les Briques Rouges*” in Vigneux (AUA, 1962-72), certified “heritage of the twentieth century” in December 2008, is threatened with destruction, following the granting of a demolition permit in June 2015, [http://www.paulchemetov.com/media/news\\_97\\_file.pdf](http://www.paulchemetov.com/media/news_97_file.pdf), accessed on February 2016.